

Ethics Day draws capacity crowd

By Eddy Ball

Ethics training programs traditionally present a challenge for organizers. As NIEHS Deputy Ethics Counselor Bruce Androphy, J.D., admitted during the fourth annual NIEHS Ethics Day May 21, “Making ethics fun and interesting is not an easy task.”

Androphy and his team pulled out all the stops again this year, in their quest to turn the discussion of ethics into an event that would attract people from all sectors of NIEHS, for something exciting as well as instructional. As Herculean as that task may have seemed, the members of the Ethics Office succeeded famously.

The team interspersed two hot-topic talks on applied ethics, with seven short and humorous homemade videos, concluding the program with a game of Ethics Bingo that turned the mastery of ethical concepts into a laughter-filled competition. The team also enlisted the musical talent and wit of NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., who has made ethics one of her top priorities at NIEHS.

“This [annual Ethics Day] is a very, very special thing that we do here at NIEHS,” Birnbaum told the audience. “It’s really not done anywhere else that I know of, certainly not at [other parts of] NIH, and we’d love to export it.”

“It’s really a great opportunity for all of us to learn something new to update our knowledge of ethics and bioethics issues,” she said. “At the same time, it’s an opportunity to have some fun and play some ethical games ... [and] I hope most of it you will remember.”

Ethics in the workplace and in society

Before moving into the more serious portion of the program, Birnbaum and Androphy led the audience in an a cappella performance of “Filing Day,” sung to the music of the Beatles’ classic “Yesterday.” Birnbaum’s lyrics offered a humorous take on the ethics requirements and the consequences of failure to comply.

This year’s featured guest speaker was Cheryl Kane-Piasecki, a program analyst in the U.S. Office of Government Ethics (OGE) Training Products Development Section. Kane-Piasecki addressed a “New OGE Game Changer — Service on Professional Boards.”

The presentation outlined [new rules](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2013-03-06/pdf/2013-05243.pdf) (<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2013-03-06/pdf/2013-05243.pdf>) changing a regulation that, since 1996, has prohibited federal employees from serving in their official capacity on the board of a nonprofit, without a waiver from their agency. The waivers could be difficult to obtain and effectively discouraged employees from accepting positions on everything from scientific panels to neighborhood boards.



Birnbaum, right, and Androphy were the perfect combination for an Ethics Day filled with wit and wisdom. As in previous years, a central message of the event is that people need to ask before they act, if there is any possibility of even the appearance of unethical behavior. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Kane-Piasecki’s presentation on participation in nonprofit organizations inspired a number of questions from scientists in the audience, who either serve under current regulations or want a chance to serve under the new rules. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Resnik used plastic cups as props to show the audience what is legal and what would be banned under New York City’s soft drink rules. He said 60 percent of residents opposed the ban, which is currently suspended by court order. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

According to Kane-Piasecki, although the new rules expand opportunities for agencies to create arrangements for allowing more employees to serve on boards, they in no way release employees from their other ethical obligations in regard to conflict of interest. “I personally think this is a great move,” said Androphy about the new rules, echoing the widespread support for the changes among advocacy groups and federal employees.

With the event’s second presentation by NIEHS Bioethicist David Resnik, J.D., Ph.D., on “Food Ethics: Public Health Versus Human Freedom,” the program shifted focus from the practical workplace issues to philosophical considerations in public policy. Resnik analyzed efforts to legislate better health, by restricting sales of unhealthy food or discouraging poor eating habits through punitive taxation. “How should society balance these competing values [of individual freedom and the greater good of public health]?” he asked.

According to Resnik, there are no simple answers to the question of when paternalism is justified to protect people from themselves, as in restrictions on junk food to combat obesity; to promote safety for susceptible populations, such as children with peanut allergies; or to guard society against additional healthcare expense, as in motorcycle helmet laws. Age and competency considerations can justify restriction of individual freedom, and, he said, “I think the numbers do matter here.” The more people affected and the more expense involved can be central considerations in which way the regulatory pendulum swings — toward more individual freedom, or toward the greater social good.



Student Temporary Employment Program staffer Casey Bledsoe emceed Ethics Bingo. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Ethics Bingo helped make the educational aspect of the meeting a fun experience. NIEHS Deputy Director of Management Joellen Austin, left, and Chief of the Operations and Security Branch Mitch Williams joined in the fun, as did others in the capacity audience. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



NIEHS biologists Lisa Padilla-Banks, left, and Justin Kosak shared a laugh as Ethics Bingo challenged the audience with answers to match the prompts on the screen. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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